



# The Lincoln Kinsman

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Number 36

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

June, 1941

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## The Matrimony Myth

Among the many Lincoln fables originating with William Herndon, no one of them has so greatly influenced current thought about Lincoln's private life as the "Matrimony Myth." Five very definite accusations are brought against Lincoln as he contemplates, and later embraces, matrimony. He was a Recluse from Romance, a Fugitive from Wedlock, the Victim of a Match-Maker, the Husband of a Shrew, and a Deserter of Home.

The story of Mary Todd's eccentricities supplements the material on the shortcomings of Lincoln, and she is presented as "the female wildcat of the age," a woman whom Lincoln never loved, the cruel keeper of a "domestic hell" to which Lincoln never returned except to eat and sleep. No story of American home life has been so unfair to both husband and wife as the Lincoln "Matrimony Myth."

Four days after Herndon delivered his lecture at Springfield on Lincoln, Ann Rutledge, New Salem, etc., he

wrote a letter to Isaac N. Arnold which reveals that he was already at work on the "Matrimony Myth." He clearly implies it is based on the Ann Rutledge myth, now proven to be wholly untenable as historical data. (*Lincoln Kinsman* No. 35.)

This letter to Arnold and other letters written about the same time to Frank B. Carpenter and Charles H. Hart give us an insight into the mind of the myth-maker as he begins to disclose his secret knowledge of Lincoln's private life.

In the Arnold letter he becomes very emotional and addresses himself to the departed Lincoln as follows: "Who knows thy sufferings but one man and God (Herndon and God)." Again he exclaims, "Poor man! the world knows thee not, and who shall defend thee and set thee right before the world (Answer, Herndon)." (Hertz p. 38, 39.)

The former law partner of Lincoln wrote to Carpenter that he had trailed Lincoln as a child, boy, and man, and concludes, "Shall the world be shut

out of this temple of intelligence, prohibited from seeing and knowing what I see and know."

In spite of Herndon's assumption that he was God's messenger to tell the people the truth about Lincoln and analyze his inmost thoughts, he admitted, "Mr. Lincoln never had a confidant and therefore never unbosomed himself to others. He never spoke of his trials to me or so far as I knew to any of his friends." (Herndon p. 348.)

### *A Recluse from Romance*

It is with difficulty that we reconcile William Herndon's conflicting statements about Lincoln being a recluse from romance. On April 16, 1887 Herndon wrote a letter to Henry C. Whitney in which he stated that "Lincoln ought never to have married anyone," that he was "abstracted, cool, and never loved and could not from his very nature." (Hertz p. 103.) This seems like strange talk from one who had said Lincoln loved Ann Rutledge so ardently. It is also known that about a year after Ann died, Lincoln proposed marriage to Mary Owens. Herndon also has him submitting a marriage proposal to Sarah Rickard and, after his engagement to Mary Todd, Lincoln, so Herndon claims, fell in love with Matilda Edwards. The Herndon folklore makes Lincoln propose marriage to four out of five young women he wooed within a period of five or six years.

Herndon also wrote Whitney that Lincoln had none of the qualities to make a good husband. About the same time, however, he wrote to Isaac N. Arnold with reference to Lincoln's love for Ann Rutledge, "His fidelity to it was sublime."

(Hertz p. 37.) It seems as if fidelity was once a noble matrimonial attribute along with some other characteristics Lincoln is known to have acquired.

One other citation about Lincoln's qualifications as a husband might be observed in a letter he wrote to Mary Owens about a year or two before he began keeping company with Mary Todd. He said, "Whatever woman may cast her lot with mine, should any ever do so, it is my intention to do all in my power to make her happy and contented and there is nothing I can imagine that would make me more unhappy than to fail in the effort."

There is no question but that Lincoln was so conscientious in his approach to matrimony that he was very fearful lest he should not be able to measure up to the high ideals he had set for the marriage relations. He wrote to one recently married, "You owe debts to her (your wife) ten thousand times more sacred than you can owe to others and in that light let them be respected and observed."

### *A Fugitive from Wedlock*

Up to the time Abraham Lincoln was 28 years old he had never lived in any kind of dwelling except log cabins, and even after he reached Springfield he was in nothing more or less than a log cabin town. We might say that he had never brushed up against culture until all at once he saw it personified in an attractive young lady who had just come out of a city called the Athens of the West. Because of her intellectual attainments it cannot be doubted that Mary Todd was the first brilliant young woman with whom Abraham

Lincoln had become acquainted.

Possibly we should allow Mr. Herndon to describe Mary Todd as she appeared when Lincoln first met her. Here is his description of Mrs. Lincoln in a letter to Mr. Weik: "She was a highly cultured woman, witty, dashing, pleasant, and a lady." He wrote another letter to Weik on the same day in which he said: "She was rather pleasant, polite, civil, rather graceful in her movements, intelligent, witty, and sometimes bitter too; she was a polished girl, well educated, a good linguist, a fine conversationalist, was educated thoroughly at Lexington, Kentucky." (Hertz pp. 136-137.)

Furthermore, the father of Mary Todd Lincoln was the President of the Bank of Kentucky. He had financially supported one of Henry Clay's campaigns for the Presidency of the United States and was one of Mr. Clay's closest friends. For four years Mary Todd attended school directly opposite Henry Clay's home. At some time or other over a period of twenty years most of the outstanding statesmen of the country had visited Henry Clay at Lexington, and as a very small child Mary had moved in the presence of these men who were as great as the country produced. It was nothing strange for her to hear talk about Presidential campaigns and the making of Presidents.

It does not appear as if there can be any question about Lincoln's infatuation for Mary Todd, and that Mary greatly admired Mr. Lincoln we have dependable evidence. That they were both ardent supporters of Henry Clay may have drawn them together until their romance ripened into an engagement.

While Mary Owens in 1837 could see nothing in Abraham Lincoln but just another pioneer, Mary Todd visualized in him a preeminent statesman. She knew the stuff from which Presidents are made. A news dispatch of some years ago states that in the possession of General Preston of Lexington, Kentucky, there was a letter addressed to the daughter of Governor Wickliffe by Mary Todd which contained a playful description of the gawky young Lincoln to whom she was betrothed. She said: "But I mean to make him President of the United States all the same. You will see that, as I always told you, I will yet be the President's wife."

Herndon introduced into his story as a climax of Lincoln's first romance with Mary Todd a mythical marriage scene said to have taken place on January 1, 1841, in which Lincoln ran away from his wedding. All reputable Lincoln students today accept this story as absolutely without proof, yet Mr. Herndon apparently based both Abraham Lincoln's reason for finally marrying Mary Todd and Mary's acceptance of him on this fictitious event.

It is now generally accepted that Lincoln went to Mary Todd on January 1, 1841, and broke their engagement on the grounds that he felt he would not be able to make her happy, realizing, as he surely did, how greatly she must humble herself to come down to his economic status. There is no evidence of any ill feeling between them at this time and certainly no evidence of the bridegroom's running away from the wedding.

*The Lincoln Kinsman*

Published Monthly by  
LINCOLNIANA PUBLISHERS

Box 1110—Fort Wayne, Ind.



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BUSINESS MANAGER  
MAURICE A. COOK

Annual Subscription.....\$2.00  
Single Copies ..... .25

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*The Victim of a Match-Maker*

Another one of the Herndon fables which may be associated with Lincoln's finally entering matrimony is to the effect that Mrs. Simeon Francis was largely responsible for the final accomplishment of the nuptials of Lincoln and Mary Todd. Apparently he had made no notes on a conversation twenty-three years before which he tried to recall, yet his memory does not seem to have dimmed sufficiently to prevent Herndon's making a very positive statement about the episode. He said, "The more I think of Mrs. Francis, Mary Todd, and Mr. Lincoln, the

more am I convinced that Mary Todd helped Mrs. Francis in the conspiracy to yoke Lincoln. Miss Todd wanted L. terribly and worked, played her cards, through Mrs. Francis's hands." (Hertz p. 236.)

One who makes a careful study of Lincoln's correspondence with Joshua Speed after the first Mary Todd romance and during the time Joshua was preparing to marry Fanny Henning, need have no misgivings about who sold Abraham Lincoln on the desirability of matrimony at the conclusion of his second romance with Mary Todd. Lincoln most certainly sold himself on the idea.

The letters written to Speed by Lincoln reflect to the largest measure his own personal experiences in the first romance with Mary Todd and clearly indicate how he was thinking with respect to the possibilities of eventually diving into the matrimonial sea. Just one year after Lincoln's engagement to Mary was broken, he advised Speed of his "deepest solicitude for the success of the enterprise you are engaged in." This enterprise was matrimony. Lincoln felt that Speed might also withdraw at the last moment and he wrote, "Let me who have some reason to speak with judgment on such a subject" try and see you safely launched on the sea of matrimony.

Apparently Lincoln is rehearsing his own experience when he says "I know what the painful point with you is at all times when you are unhappy. It is an apprehension that you do not love her as you should. What nonsense."

In a subsequent letter referring to Speed's contemplated wedding, Lin-

coln indirectly opens his heart again to us. Speed was going through the same psychological reaction which Lincoln had undergone and was beginning to question whether or not he did really love the girl he was going to marry. His sweetheart had been ill and he was brooding over her illness. Lincoln insisted that Speed's brooding was the "indubitable evidence of your undying affection for her." Lincoln then concludes with another personal reminiscence, "You know the hell I have suffered on that point and how tender I am about it." Two weeks later Lincoln wrote Speed again and, in referring to the wedding day which had been set, implied that after the happy event occurred Speed would "hereafter be on ground that I have never occupied." The concluding part of the letter is a reassurance to Speed that he would eventually be the happiest of men.

It is quite evident that in the lengthy letters which Lincoln wrote to Speed trying to assure him how mistaken he had been to question his love for his fiancée, Lincoln had sold himself on the proposition. He saw how foolish he had been in breaking off relations with Mary Todd at the conclusion of the first romance, and he was deeply moved when he opened Speed's letter to learn whether or not Speed was happy in matrimony. Lincoln commented on the letter announcing Speed's wedding: "I opened the letter with intense anxiety and trepidation; so much so, that, although it turned out better than I expected, I have hardly yet, at a distance of ten hours, become calm. I tell you, Speed, our forebodings (for

which you and I are peculiar) are all the worst sort of nonsense."

Subsequently he wrote to Speed on July 4, 1842: "I believe now that had you understood my case at the time as well as I understood yours afterward, by the aid you would have given me I should have sailed through clear." In other words, he would have married Mary.

Lincoln needed one more assurance before deciding to follow Speed into matrimony, so three months later, already in the midst of his second romance with Mary Todd, Lincoln asked this very personal question of Speed, "Are you now in feeling as well as judgment glad that you are married as you are?" Posterity should always feel thankful that Speed could give Lincoln an affirmative answer else he might not have become the husband of Mary Todd just a month after this all important question was put to Speed.

While we know that it was in the home of Mrs. Simeon Francis where Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd met after the Lost Township letters appeared in the *Sangamo Journal*, one who has followed through Lincoln's reaction to Speed's matrimonial venture can have no doubts that his own decision to marry was far more important than any trap Mrs. Francis may have laid to ensnare him for Mary Todd.

#### *The Husband of a Shrew*

No one has contributed more to a misunderstanding of Mary Todd Lincoln's real character than William Herndon. The motive back of the advice and misleading statements about her is quite evident in a letter which Herndon wrote stating that

Mrs. Lincoln hated him for the same reason that "a thief hates a policeman who knows a dangerous secret about him." (Hertz p. 40.)

In his Lincoln biography, Herndon says: "To me it has always seemed plain that Mr. Lincoln married Mary Todd to save his honor and in doing that he sacrificed his domestic peace." (Herndon p. 181.) In this he implies that Lincoln had dishonored himself by running away from a wedding in 1841 and now felt himself bound to marry Miss Todd. Herndon also explains Miss Todd's motive for marrying Lincoln. He claims that by running away from the altar in 1841 Lincoln had "crushed her proud, womanly spirit; she felt degraded in the eyes of the world. Love fled at the approach of revenge." (Herndon p. 182.) This was the secret from which Mrs. Lincoln's domestic quarrels sprang, "a woman's revenge." Yet in the same letter in referring to Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln, Herndon said, "All that I know ennobles both." (Hertz p. 40.)

It is difficult for the average reader to understand how a man would be ennobled by marrying a woman he did not love and how a woman would be ennobled by marrying a man for the opportunity of heaping revenge upon him, but such is the reasoning of any myth-maker who usually finds it necessary to keep creating new myths to give nourishment to the old ones.

Herndon concluded that the mythical Ann Rutledge affair was responsible for the equally mythical missing bridegroom episode, and in the evolution of Herndon's myths he permitted the belief that Lincoln lived in a "domestic hell" to grow out of

the purely fabulous absent bridegroom story.

Mr. Herndon's abuse of Mrs. Lincoln was accentuated as time went on, and the fair and just picture of her presented in his early efforts at letter-writing soon changed to such a characterization as "Haughty, proud, aristocratic, insolent, witty, bitter," and then he used his prize denunciation by calling her "the female wild-cat of the age." (Hertz p. 131, 134.)

Herndon did not stop with his abuse of Mrs. Lincoln but visited his wrath upon her children. He wrote to his collaborator, Jesse Weik, "I have felt on many times I wanted to wring the necks of these brats and pitch them out of the window." Then continues one of the most inexcusable statements and accompanying inference that Herndon ever made. He said, "I should like to know one thing. What caused the death of these children?"

Herndon then stated that although he had an opinion of what caused their deaths he would never reveal it, but in the sentence immediately following the query and in the same paragraph, he at least reveals what was occupying his mind just then. He said, "I know a good deal of the Lincoln family and too much of Mrs. Lincoln. I wish I did not know as much of her as I do; she was a tigress." (Hertz p. 129.)

When Abraham Lincoln married Mary Todd he had inscribed upon the ring which he gave her these words, "Love is eternal." If we may go back to this wedding day and make the fair assumption that these two people were in love with each other, grant the unpleasantness that would often occur because of the well recog-

nized fiery temper of Mrs. Lincoln, and otherwise allow them to live together for twenty-two years as companions in the home and as parents of four children, we would be better able to understand Abraham Lincoln's development.

A correspondent to the "Christian Register" tells of a conversation with Abraham Lincoln in Washington in the great East Room one evening where Mrs. Lincoln stood not far away in another group. Mr. Lincoln was led to say: "My wife is as handsome as when she was a girl and I a poor nobody then fell in love with her and what is more, I have never fallen out." The informant then stated, "I shall cherish to my death the memory of his words coming so unexpectedly."

If a compilation were made of the good things said about Mary Todd which have been obscured, they most certainly would outweigh many of the untenable stories which have grown up about the home life of the Lincolns. Certainly no one, with the possible exception of Lincoln's own mother, contributed more to his advancement and helped more in preparing him for the supreme task of guiding the union through those troublesome days than his wife, Mary Todd Lincoln.

### *A Deserter of Home*

The climax of Herndon's "Matrimony Myth" is found in the assertion that Lincoln practically deserted his wife and purposely absented himself from home for long periods of time, usually six months during the year. His statement about Lincoln's constantly remaining out on the circuit rather than returning to Springfield

when an opportunity provided is one of the most glaring exaggerations of the many untrue statements about Lincoln which Herndon has passed on to posterity. It is but another myth in the general evolution of the matrimony mythology built on the story that Lincoln was married to a tigress.

In a letter written to Jesse W. Weik on February 24, 1887, Herndon said that David Davis was judge over about ten counties and went around this circuit twice a year. It generally took him six to eight months. Herndon claimed, "Lincoln would never come home while the court was grinding out justice on the circuit, to see his wife or family; while all other lawyers, every Saturday night after court hours, would start for home to see wife and babies. . . . Lincoln, poor soul, would go terribly sad at the sight, as much as to say, 'I have no wife and no home.' "

The years 1854 to 1857 seemed to be Lincoln's busiest years as a lawyer, and it was at this time that Herndon claims Lincoln played the truant from home. This period would seem to be the most appropriate one to try and discover where Lincoln spent his week-ends or Sundays.

A book edited by Paul Angle and published in 1933 which traces Lincoln day by day through the years 1854 to 1861 is most helpful in answering this question.

In 1854 Lincoln apparently spent forty Sundays at home and twelve away. Five of these twelve days were used for traveling, either to or from Springfield. According to Mr. Angle's notes it would have been impossible for Lincoln to have gone to his home from these seven points and re-

turned Monday in time for court session.

In the year 1855 Lincoln spent thirty-nine Sundays at home and was away a possible thirteen Sundays; three were spent in Chicago, one in Cincinnati, and six at points out on the circuit where it would be impossible for him to get transportation to and from Springfield.

In 1856 Abraham Lincoln spent thirty-nine Sundays at home, thirteen Sundays away from home. Nine were spent in towns too far away from Springfield for him to return, and the other four Sundays were undoubtedly spent in travel.

During the year 1857 Lincoln was at home forty-two Sundays and absent only ten Sundays. Five of the ten Sundays were spent in Chicago where, of course, he would have no opportunity to return for the week-end. One Sunday he spent at Niagara Falls with his family, and the other four Sundays he was out on the circuit at points too far distant from Springfield to make return possible.

Out of a total of 208 Sundays during the four years from 1854 through 1857, inclusive, Abraham Lincoln was apparently spending 160 of these Sundays at home to a total of 48 away from home. Thirty-two of the 48 Sundays were spent where it would be physically impossible for him to reach Springfield, and the other sixteen Sundays were just as unavailable for a visit home because he was enroute from one court house to another.

It is very doubtful indeed that Abraham Lincoln was away from Springfield for more than three or four Sundays in succession during the period observed, and usually he was

home every two weeks during the sessions of the court. There are no grounds whatever for Herndon's statement that Lincoln deserted his home for six months of the year, and it can only be explained by clearly stating that it is a gross exaggeration.

Back of the myth that Lincoln deserted his home was the attempt to show incompatibility between Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln. It may be recalled that Herndon attempted to sell Isaac N. Arnold on the idea that Lincoln did not love his wife, but apparently he was not successful as this paragraph appears in Arnold's book on Lincoln (p. 82-83): "Mrs. Lincoln often entertained small numbers of friends at dinner, and somewhat larger numbers at evening parties. In his modest and simple home, everything was orderly and refined, and there was always on the part of both Mr. and Mrs. Lincoln, a cordial, hearty, western welcome, which put every guest perfectly at ease. Her table was famed for the excellence of its rare Kentucky dishes, and in season was loaded with venison, wild turkeys, prairie chickens, quails, and other game, which in those early days was abundant. Yet it was the genial manner and ever kind welcome of the hostess, and the wit and humor, anecdote, and unrivalled conversation of the host, which formed the chief attraction, and made a dinner at Lincoln's cottage an event to be remembered."

Isaac N. Arnold, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*. A. C. McClurg and Company, Chicago, 1891.

William H. Herndon and Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*. Albert and Charles Boni, New York, 1936.

Emanuel Hertz, *The Hidden Lincoln*. Viking Press, New York, 1938.